

BAYREUTH 'NOVELTY'

STATINTL

Wieland Wagner's 'Tannhaeuser' Staging Unlike Any Other of This Work

By HENRY PLEASANTS

THAT Wieland Wagner's new "Tannhaeuser" would be unlike any other "Tannhaeuser" ever staged was a foregone conclusion. Not so foregone was the manner in which the new production would differ from the tradition.

"Tannhaeuser" belongs with "Die Meistersinger" and "Lohengrin" in that category of Wagner opera least separable from details of time and space. Young Wieland likes to get at the spiritual and philosophic substance of his grandfather's works, to concentrate on those elements that transcend locality and period. Thus far he has tackled those works in which locality and period are the least important—"Der Ring des Nibelungen," "Tristan und Isolde" and "Parsifal."

He has hitherto avoided the others. "Die Meistersinger," which is hardly separable from medieval Nuremberg, he left to Rudolf Hartmann; and "Lohengrin," hardly less tied to the Middle Ages, if not to the Scheldt, he left to his brother Wolfgang. With "Tannhaeuser," however, he has finally come to grips with the problem. He has done it with the ingenious disregard for tradition characteristic of everything he does.

Many Changes

Gone is Thuringia, gone the Venusberg, gone the wooded vales and the other familiar settings associated with "Tannhaeuser" for more than a hundred years. The Venusberg becomes a symbolic shell, the bacchanale a collective exercise in bumps and grinds. The Hall of Song is a stylized expression of court regimentation, and the exteriors mere studies in ambiguity.

As usual with Wieland Wagner, it is impossible not to admire the achievement even while finding it misguided. One may find all or most of it wrong, but even when wrong, Wieland is magnificent.

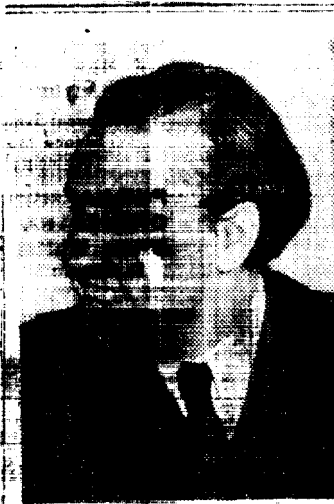
Certainly not all of this. "Tannhaeuser" is wrong. Generally speaking, the direction is superb and the settings awful. This dividing line between Wieland Wagner the stage director and Wieland Wagner the regisseur

has been detectable before, but never so vividly. It took this production to point up the probability that the future of Bayreuth may depend upon his finding in another artist the counterpart to his own genius as a director.

Looking back over his previous productions, one recalls that Wieland has always gotten himself into pictorial trouble at that moment when lights no longer do the trick. Klingsor's castle, for instance, has always been a blemish in his otherwise exemplary production of "Parsifal." The huts in the first acts of "Die Walkuere" and "Siegfried" and Isolde's apartment aboard ship have been similarly unsuccessful. In short, Wieland is embarrassed when more is required than the suggestion of an image.

So it is with "Tannhaeuser," which requires a number of specific objects. The Venusberg is a repulsive failure, and the Hall of Song a stilted and rather pointless caricature. Only in the last act, where he can escape into darkness, does Wieland come pictorially into his own. There, with the lights out, dim spots and the soloists, he can work easily in the medium he really understands—the movement and grouping of actors on the stage.

In this, as always, he is magnificent. And this is probably all that matters. For the effect of his stage direction throughout the production is to render intelligible and communicative not only the action but also the music. It



Robert Halmi

Wieland Wagner.

was, to be sure, a beautiful musical performance, with Ramon Vinay as Tannhaeuser, Gre Brouwenstein as Elisabeth, Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau as Wolfram and either Josef Keilberth or Eugen Jochum conducting. But one has heard other performances of comparable excellence.

That one was reminded, above all things, of what a wonderful old opera this is can be attributed primarily to Wieland Wagner's stage direction.

Which is true of almost everything else in the new Bayreuth.